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Written in Sand

by

George Bancroft Duren

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WRITTEN IN SAND

BY

GEORGE BANCROFT DUREN

NEW YORK
TOBIAS A. WRIGHT
1921

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TO MY MOTHER

THANKS ARE DUE TO THE EDITORS OF THE BOSTON TRANSCRIPT, NEWARK EVENING NEWS, NEWARK SUNDAY LEDGER AND NEWARK SUNDAY CALL FOR THEIR KIND PERMISSION TO REPRINT SOME OF THE VERSES CONTAINED HEREIN

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS

I	In the Mirror of Yesterday . .	9 to 42
II	Peace and War	43 to 51
III	Spring and Winter	53 to 56

In the Mirror of Yesterday

WRITTEN IN SAND

It was in yesteryear
I watched you trace
Our names upon the sand,
Framing them with a heart of sea-foam lace
That dancing waves had cast upon the strand.

You laughed and in your eyes
Shone a rich light
That dimmed the starry wonder of the skies
And warmed the night.

Many waves have washed that shore since then:
Other hands have formed the names of men
Upon those gleaming sands,
And each has vanished when the sea rolled in.

So our names, too, are gone from view!
Caressing waves have carried them away
Just as the surge of time has carried you.
And all that I have left
Is like our symbol on that faithless shore:
A poignant memory—and nothing more.

AN INCENSE JAR AT DUSK

A small bronze incense jar
  With dragon face and weird magenta eyes,
Brought from a land afar
  Where cherry blossoms vie with cherry skies.

The fragrant dust is lit
  And like an opening rose the flame awakes
As dreamily I sit
  To breathe the drowsy perfume that it makes.

It brings a poppy sleep,
  As on the gathering haze I build my dream,
Where ancient willows weep
  And moonbeams are embroidered on the stream.

Trees crooning on the hill,
  While from the shadowed woods the answering
    note
Of hidden woodland rill,
  Chanting a love-song from its silvery throat.

The dying flames grow cold,
  And only scattered incense clouds remain.
I waken tired and old
  To find that I have idly dreamed again.

THE HOUSE UPON THE HILL

Upon its emerald throne like some proud queen
  Guarded by courtier pines in stately row,
The House Upon the Hill, with august mien,
  Looked down upon the winding road below.

Strangers who trod the dusty, burning road
  Looked up and stopped and to each other said:
"Great happiness must dwell in that abode.
  There hope and peace must surely make their bed.

"Is there no joy for us of humble birth?
  Why must we sow to harvest only pain?"
And lifting up their burdens from the earth
  They turned away and sought the road again.

Blind souls—they only saw the painted shell
  Unhappiness had built to hide its lair:
To them it was a place for love to dwell.
  How should they know deep sorrow lingered
    there?

What seemed to them soft music of the trees
  Was but the wind's gruff voice in mocking jeers:
They pictured flowers nodding in the breeze
  But could not see their sad eyes dimmed with
    tears.

Thus each who passed looked up and reasoned so,
  And wished that he might dwell in such a spot,
Unknowing that within the dust below
  He was possessor of a happier lot.

EAGLE ROCK AT NIGHT

Night lay like a black robe of silk
Tucked in about the far earth rim,
Stars that bedecked its endless folds
Were diamonds from the crown of Him
Whose loving hands had clustered them
In an eternal diadem.

Far as the vision could command
The warm, appealing lights of home
Shone like the soft reflected rays
Of stars in that majestic dome.
They twinkled with a witching light,
Then vanished one by one from sight
To join the dark hosts of the night.

Once a laboring furnace
Gushed molten breath into the sky,
Its blood rays rose into the drifting clouds
Staining their saintly white with crimson dye:
Rudely a whistle broke the tranquil still
As, like a winding phosphorescent snake,
A train crept slowly by.

A church bell tolled the end of evensong
And one could almost hear the sweet-voiced choir
Answer a soft amen to the rich notes
Reverberating from the ancient spire.
'Way in the east the lofty gleaming lights
Of a great city marked an unseen sea:
Two steel shafts set with many thousand eyes
Vied with the beacon light of Liberty.

O glorious night, I will remember long
Your witchery,
Your silence and the gift of quiet peace
You brought to me.

A BOOK OF MEMORIES

Of all my treasured books
A dusty, faded one I love the best:
Its name is Memories
And in its pages, only, I find rest.

Slowly I turn each leaf
To read again the fond tales written there,
Wander the bygone paths,
Relight old stars in midnight's dusky hair.

Its title page is decked
With violets we gathered long ago,
While on each aging sheet
Are living sprigs of old-time mistletoe:

Fragrance of other springs,
The haunting touch of soft, adoring hands,
Moons that died yesterday,
A glint of stardust on forgotten sands.

No other book has charm
Enough to hold my weary heart-strings fast,
For there can be no tales
As sweet as those love bound within the past.

HALLOWE'EN

From catacombs laid low in dust
Where green-eyed spiders sleep,
From marshes where gaunt cat-tails each
Their lonely vigil keep,
From heart of forest, depth of lake,
Beyond the edge of light
Weird witches and their kindred folk
Come trooping forth tonight.

Down through a royal arch of trees
In homage bending low,
Across a meadow's emerald stretch
The gay paraders go,
Until at last in strange array
They reach a field of corn,
There to disport in phantom style
Until the birth of morn.

Their leader waves a magic wand
And like a sword unsheathed,
The sere and dusty stalks of corn
With silver sheen are wreathed:
And stardust falling on the shocks
Wraps them in mantle white:
They stand like bearded sentinels
Against the rim of night.

A tall pine with pretentious mien
Begins a baton sway,
While martial notes of rustling leaves
Announce the roundelay:
As dancers rise, clasp hands and whirl
Into the music's swell,

These ghostly masqueraders play
Beneath the fall moon's spell.

And pumpkins with long slanting eyes,
Like captive stars aglow,
Rise from the dust and slowly wave
Their green arms to and fro.
So through the night while others sleep
The mad dance holds its sway
Until the first shy kiss of sun
Warns of the coming day.

A CHILD'S PRAYER

God make me like the sun
To rise each morning with a smiling face,
And as the day goes by
Help me to leave warm sunbeams every place,
Till shadows softly fall
And on the wings of night I drift away
Still radiant to think
That I may wake with smiles the coming day.

THE SHOWER

Murmuring, rustling through the trees
The gentle shower came,
Until it reached the calm lake shore
And mottled the green that its bosom wore
With dancing drops of cool, fresh rain
That pitter-pattered a sweet refrain:
With a song in its heart the shower came.

And a song was in the heart of me,
And a song in the heart of you,
As we nosed our boat in the muddy bank
And laughed as the stony anchor sank
—For I was in love with you.

You did not care for the rain that fell,
For an oak tree sheltered our small boat well
And the few cool drops that wet your hair
Commingled with the fragrance there.
One drop to your lips in a rambling streak
I brushed away with my own rough cheek;
Brushed it away, but held the place
Close to your delicate, warm, sweet face.

And together we sat while the shower fell,
Cheek close to cheek—carefree—
Not heeding when the storm went by
And the sun beamed forth in a cloudless sky,
So sweet was the song in the heart of you
And the song in the heart of me.

IT WAS IN SPRINGTIME

It was in springtime:
Spring with its breath of new-born flowers,
Dawning of our wondrous hours
When we clambered the rocks together.

The sea lay at our feet
Whispering among the shells and crevices,
Or lifting now and then a foam-crowned head
Up from its kelp-trimmed bed
As if to say:
"Come—I'll not harm you—come and play!"
And then rolled back into its vast retreat.

It was the time of roses,
Roses that opened to the smiles of morn
To dream amid sweet fragrance through the night.
And, Oh! our hearts were light
As gulls we watched wing through the sky
In tireless flight.

Now spring is here again
And the sea is calling:
"Come play with me,
Match your music laughter
With my silvery melody."

Hark, the sea is calling!
But only the echo, softly falling,
Of another springtime
Answers.

DEATH OF SUMMER

Shadows are lengthening across the sky,
And trees have doffed their frocks of youthful green
For robes of richer hue, while in between
The clustered stars an opal moon gleams high
Above the woods where sleeping violets lie
Tucked in their leafy beds; the winds are keen
With earthy smells, and everywhere are seen
The last gifts of a summer soon to die.

Death! Yet how unlike other ends this one.
With tenderness old summer decks each tree
In brightest raiment, and with fragrant breath,
Whispering softly that her life is done,
She gently falls asleep: we hardly see
That she has gone, so beautiful her death.

THE RETURNING

I wandered at the fall of dusk, alone.
The stars were dull, the moon's face hewn of stone,
Gruff was the wind—lost was its melody
For you had gone from me.

Then you came back. The moon upon the road
Transformed the muddy ruts to silvery bars,
Lightly the wind awoke the leaves to song
And tears gleamed in the soft eyes of the stars.

So has it been, so shall it always be
When you, my love, return again to me.

JUST DREAMING

Dearest, it is your face that comes to me
In those sweet moments when I idly dream
Of youth, and happiness, and things that seem
To seal within them love's eternity:
And like the sound of a soft melody
Or murmuring echo of some plaintive stream,
Whose silvery ripples mate with each moonbeam,
I hear your voice so happy and carefree.

What an exquisite joy my heart would know
If you might cease to be a memory,
And come again to bring my dreamings true,
That loving you I might live ever so
Finding full happiness in serving thee
And worshipping forever none but you.

OLD LOVES

Deep within my heart are sealed
All the things I loved with you:
Shattered hopes and songs half sung
And the dreams that ne'er came true.

As a rose jar filled with blooms
We both gathered in the May,
So my heart is fragrant with
Petals of our yesterday.

Tenderly I breathe the dust
And the perfumed memories there
Fill me with the strangely sad
Peacefulness that follows prayer.

Things we love—each one comes back—
Breath of half forgotten springs,
Songs of soaring birds that bore
Blue of Heaven on their wings.

Stars that only we could see,
Moons that smiled for us alone,
Laughing winds, the wild brook's rune,
Trees upon their mountain throne.

Things we loved—all have passed by
Just as you have gone from me,
Yet I keep them sweet and dear
In my vase of memory.

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER'S

(The priest returns to find his house of worship a smoking ruin.)

Where but so short a while before had stood
The modest church in sacred silentness,
Now ruins with their grim and blackened dress
Bear the unhappy sign of widowhood:
Smoke circles from a small charred cross of wood
While altar cloths, strewn with the carelessness
Of entrails from the sacrifice express
A sadness that no other ruin could.

Slowly the priest draws near God's house of prayer
With eyes that tell what lips refuse to speak.
A curious crowd breaks way to let him by
For in his face has come a great despair
As if his hopes had turned as sere and bleak
As that scarred cross mute pointing towards the sky.

TRIBUTE

(To the memory of my Grandfather)

Spun like a thread that feeds a weaver's loom
Until at last the toiler's task is done,
So was his life a splendid tapestry
Of priceless faith and friendship he had won.

JINNY

(Eight years old)

Peacefully in sleep she lay,
The still, bronze curls in disarray
Fell 'round her face like the last ray
Of sunshine at the sleep of day.

Spun like a fan of cobweb lawn
Her lashes tenderly were drawn
Like guards before her soft blue eyes,
Unfathomed as warm summer skies.

In reverence I bent and pressed
My lips against the hands at rest
As two rose petals on her breast.

She stirred with sweet unknowing grace
And soft curls wandered from their place
Hiding the glory of her face.

So with a tenderness divine
I tiptoed from my childhood shrine.

PARTING

Up from the lap of the peaceful slumbering ocean,
Into the void of a starless, all-patient heaven,
Turning the sea foam into a silvery cobweb
A soft moon wandered.

Deep in the west, warming the earth with a last
sweet smile of contentment,
A coral sun shed pastel peace in its setting,
Gathering day to a gentle close with its splendor.

So came the sorrowful hour that looked on our
parting;
And the moon and the sun and the sea and you
together
Were one in the sadness of leaving.

Then into the arms of night, with a white moon
guiding,
I rode away—leaving you standing alone in the
flickering daylight:
You and the setting sun and our golden moments.

SHADOWS AMONG THE SHADOWS

Noiselessly our canoe, like an idle water bug,
Drifted upon the silver-inlaid waters.
Before us the mountain humped its back against a
canopy of stars
While at its foot two breathing shadows listened.

Then a paddle slipped from the gunwale,
Waking night's silence as it smacked the sleeping
waters:
And two does, lifting dripping mouths in timid
wonder,
Melted into the mystery of the mountain.

COBWEBS

Life is like a cobweb:
And we the spiders toiling at the rapid looms of time,
Weave steadily life's tapestry with a rich thread of years,
Binding the strands of passing days together as we climb
Up to the cobweb's summit through the sparkling dew of tears.

So with the spider when October comes,
Turning each green leaf to a rattling husk,
We find the finished cobweb hanging there
Deserted in the melancholy dusk.

Life has its grim October, too,
And when it calls we each must leave behind
The cobweb of whatever life we spun
So those to come may test its mesh and find
Our character by what the loom has done.

LOVE AND I

I have a trysting place with love:
No, not where surging sea
Lashes the barnacle-covered crags
And whips the seaweed like wind-tossed flags
As it strains to set it free.

Nor do we meet
Where the candle stars
Blink as the clouds sail by
And the faithful moon from ivory hewn
Hangs sleeping in the sky.

But deep in the sanctum of my heart
Where silence and peace find place:
There love and I are truly one,
For that is our trysting place.

STARTLED

A rosebud and a violet
Both in a Grecian vase
Were ardently a-wooing
In modest flower ways.

The violet demurely
Touched light the rosebud's cheek
And nestled 'neath its petals
For honeyed lips to seek.

They kissed—and quickly parted
As startled lovers do,
For a peeping beam of sunlight
Had seen the kissing too.

MESSAGE OF THE ROSE

Plucking the first unfolded rose
That bloomed within my garden close,
I kissed its petals wet with dew
And gave the lip-warm bud to you,
Who, smelling it, seemed unaware,
Of tender kisses hidden there.

You did not tell me that you knew
The bud had brought my love to you,
And yet the blush that warmed your cheek
Showed that the rose had dared to speak
Those tender words that I, afraid,
Upon its petal lips had laid.

THE PATHS OF THE USED-TO-BE

The quaint old things of yesterday
Are but a few short steps away:
At the foot of the hill in a quiet vale
They are waiting to whisper some old-time tale.

The quaint old things of yesterday
Still linger ere they pass away,
And so we may freshen their memory
If we follow the paths of the used-to-be.

And the paths of the used-to-be are these:
A roadway cloistered 'round with trees,
A homestead, brown and ivy grown,
Still shadow oaks that stand alone
Like sentinels to guard the way;
These are the things of yesterday.

A SONG

My heart is aflame with song,
Crystal clear and healing as organ notes
That creep through an incensed cloister
And out of a sainted window
To life everlasting.

My heart is running riot with music,
Soft and as yet unborn to the world
As the sound of a mountain cataract
Throwing its silver breath
Like a benediction
Upon the upturned, waiting lips of flowers.

My heart trembles with thankfulness
As shadow trees
Quiver and murmur in the arms of night
Like lovers embracing.

My heart is like a garden delicately fragrant
Echoing softly the eternal peace Chopin,
Peace of music,
Peace of poets,
Peace of understanding.

My heart is radiant with song,
Sweet song—song of the Christ Child,
And its words are these:
"I love you."

SUNSET

Folding the sea within a smile divine
The sun sank in a maze of majesty,
Brimming the ocean rim with Godly wine.

Wine turned to amber on the pulsing deep,
A saffron glow and then a withered gray.
Dark shadows fell and found the sea asleep.

IN THE DISTANCE

Peaceful walks through the tremulous heart of the
woodland,
Love and hope in the nod of each sun-kissed flower,
Time when the smile on your lips was my shrine
of devotion:
All in the distance.

Memory of days when blossoms of spring seemed
eternal,
Whispering hopes now lost in the depths of the
forest,
Only the dream of your face and an echo of laughter
Left to console me.

PEACE AFTER PRAYER

Pale tapers on the altar, burning dim,
Threw lonely shadows on a crucifix
Of Him
Who suffered death to save his fellow men.

Kneeling before the candles' ebbing glow,
Whose amber rays fell ghostly on his face,
A form bent low
In penance and in prayer.

Gently the even breezes, southward bent,
Crept up the somber passage from the door
And flames sent
Lean, gaunt shadows hastening to and fro.

A sudden gust blew all the tapers out
And darkness fell around the praying form,
While all about
The fragrance of sweet incense filled the room.

But though all earthly light had faded low,
The unseen love and light of God was there,
For all men know
The sad, sweet peace that follows after prayer.

And strains of music of the long ago
Returned again to charm the listener's ear:
And kneeling so
A silent benediction filled his heart.

YOU NEVER KNEW

You are the sweet dream of a faded hour,
A happy hour too quickly sped away
When I beheld in the fairest flower
Of yesterday.

And yet I know the future will deny
A dearer time than that I spent with you:
And I am sad to think you passed me by
And never knew.

LOVE'S HOUR

You are the dream of one immortal hour
When youth and love and you and I were one:
A time so short I found it passed forever
Ere yet begun.

Since then night with its host of deathless stars—
Each one a sacred memory to me—
Has held its sway and every hour has been
Eternity.

TO A FRIEND

Life holds unnumbered joys for me:
Freshness of water and the warm smell of food,
Deep forest paths and twilight solitude,
Comfort of houses; the ease of a rocking chair,
Moonbeams and starlight and the breath of a
woman's hair.

Cleanness I love and the fresh faint smell of soap,
Flowers' scent and the pungent, deep-voiced sea,
The sun as it sets in a rope of heliotrope:
All these bring peace and happiness to me.

Yet far above each of these welcome things
I hold the comfort that your friendship brings.

SWEET CONTENTMENT

Soft music and a dream of you,
The perfumed breath of virgin Spring,
An amber moon hung in the sky
And breezes gently whispering.

These tokens of contentment known
But in Youth's transient age
Are like autumnal flowers blown,
Whose fragrance is their heritage.

SONG OF THE LEAVES

Winter is coming.
How do I know?
The scurrying leaves
Have told me so.

They hadn't much time
To stop their play
For they knew Jack Frost
Was on his way:

But as they capered
And danced in glee
They whispered softly
This tale to me:

"Oh, catch the sunbeams,
Store them away
To warmthen your heart
Each Winter's day.

"Gather the incense
Of dying leaves
To breathe when the snow
Hangs from the eaves.

"And drink of the wine
On South Wind's breath,
For Winter's coming
Brings Summer's death."

Then they hastened by,
Soft echoes fell,
And thus sweet summer
Had said farewell.

Peace and War

ARMISTICE DAY

The world went mad with joy that hallowed day
When Peace, with low-bowed head,
Trod slowly down the trenches where men lay,
Dead bodies heaped on dead.

Laughter, like some spring stream through long
days held
Within its tomb of ice,
Woke in the hearts of those who had beheld
War's bitter sacrifice.

Shout after shout re-echoed to the clouds,
Like children's voices through
An old deserted house hung with gray shrouds
Of dreams that were untrue.

Peace! Yet with all our songs each heart returned
To graves ungarlanded,
Where other men long days before had earned
The great peace of the dead.

BETHLEHEM STAR

(Christmas, 1919)

I followed the star the shepherds
Watched burn in the ancient skies
Till it led beyond the earth rim
Where the flaming Sun God dies,
Past fields where sacred blood had flowed
Like sacrificial wine,
The star passed o'er—but stopped where forms
Stretched out in endless line.

Rage tore me as my eyes beheld
What wounds their bodies showed,
And yet I marveled how each face
With sweet compassion glowed.

And as the shepherds old were led
To the new-born Saviour's side,
The Bethlehem star had guided me
Where saviors of men had died.

THANKSGIVING PRAYER

(To One Who Died in France)

He dines today among the hosts
Of ever-living dead;
He feasts beside the throne of One
With thorns upon His head.

Yet though his loss be hard to bear,
My heart is proud that he is there,
And offers thanks in silent prayer.

MEMORIAL DAY

We can not lay
Rose wreaths today
Upon the graves of our's who lie
So silently beneath the sky
Of flower-blooming France.

We can not kneel,
Or prostrate feel
That bitter-sweet of still commune
With those whom God hath called so soon
To their deliverance.

Yet even though we may not place
A wreath above each sleeping face,
We shall not fail one single cross,
Symbolic of our sacred loss:
Our prayers, our tears shall span the wave,
Our hearts shall visit every grave.

SEA SONG

Warring days have drifted by,
Ships grow dim against the sky
As the sailors are returning
To the firesides of their yearning.

But as years turn men to dreaming,
So they, too, will see steel gleaming,
Ghostly ships loom in the darkness
Where the moonbeams clothe their starkness
With a raiment silver spangled,
Through the breathing waves entangled:
Hear the clear voiced bugles calling
And their echo softly falling
Where the stars like tears of gladness
Sparkle with a human sadness.

Sailor lads are fast returning
To the loved ones of their yearning:
Yet within their hearts they'll be
Wedded always to the sea.

TWO AUTUMNS

An autumn once in France I knew
When flowers bloomed and skies were blue
And ruddy peasants in the fields
Toiled for the spoils the rich earth yields:
An autumn that exhaled sweet peace,
Foretold the granaries increase.

But when another autumn came
These homely lands were not the same:
Brave hearts wept at the heathen scene
Of chaos where sweet peace had been.
War's bludgeon held its temporal sway,
Death, anguish, rapine ruled the day,
The fields of rye were scorched and dead,
Each gleaming scythe was dripping red.

Two autumns now in France I know.
One breathes of peace, the other woe,
And yet the latter seems to be
More sacred in my memory.

LEST WE FORGET

(Easter, 1919)

Our hearts with fulness beat for Him
Who has returned from out the grim
Black agony of Calvary.

Yet let us not forget one prayer
For countless crosses, grim and bare,
Mute guardians of martyrs there
Upon another Calvary.

OUR ANSWER

(In memory of the *Tuscania*)

Bosomed within the sea off Ireland's coast,
They lie—our noble dead—in lasting peace.
Gladly without demur they gave their lives
Unto the end that brutal wars shall cease.

And what shall be our answer to the foe?
More men, more guns, more ships across the sea.
Theirs is the challenge: ours the solemn vow
To fight until the day of victory.

REMORSELESS SEA

Long days ago I loved the sea,
Its pungent breath, the mystery
Of tales it softly sang to me.

Then he was here and days were long,
And hearts were gay and friendship strong,
For we both loved the ocean's song.

War called—the haunting waves had still
The power and charm to strangely fill
My heart with peace and hope at will.

But now I hate that once kind sea
For it has snatched my love from me.
With cunning hand, with giant force
Showing no pity—no remorse—
It thundered wrath and with a grip
Of brutish love dragged down the ship:
Down to its heart of black despair
And holds my lover captive there.

Spring and Winter

THE HOKY-POKY MAN

Sweet Spring is here—of that I'm sure.
Yet not because the first demure
Young daffodil has raised its head
From out its green-hedged flower bed.
But yesterday I chanced to meet
Amid the chaos of the street
A hoky-poky man with cones
That brimmed with cream of peach-pink tones.

A thousand kids were hedged around
To pay their cent and taste the mound
Of saccharin snow—and then to aid
Digestion with the lemonade
Within the sweaty jug of ice,
That summoned those who had the price
Of one more cent to carry down
The gutta-percha cone of brown.
Oh, blithesome Spring is surely here
When hoky-poky men appear.

SPRING OUTBURST

I just can't make my pen behave:
It simply won't keep still.
I vowed I'd write no verse this Spring
And yet against my will
I scribble on and on and on
Of flowers bright and fair—
I simply have to write of them
When Spring is in the air,
Oh, springtime—time of song and love—
I swore I'd pass you by,
And yet I have to spring a verse—
Just one or else I'll die.

BOLD, BAD WINTER

Winter, you are Bolsheviki,
Craven, cowardly and sneaky,
To come rushing from your lair,
Tossing wild your snow-white hair
And to catch us unaware.

Blushing Spring had made her bow,
Warmed us with her smile—and now,
Out of season, out of place,
You come blowing in her face,
So that she—her form a-freezing—
Flees away in fits of sneezing.

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